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AUTHOR	Avedon, Lisa
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ABSTRACT

Many older workers in Canada today are perplexed and dismayed by the swift and dramatic changes occurring in the workplace. Plant closures, downsizings, restructuring, new technologies, international trade agreements, ecological concerns, and changing demographics have affected the Canadian workforce, particularly workers in their forties and older. Older workers who are in occupational transition require services geared to their particular needs, such as: counseling; valid, meaningful, and reliable support services; and learning programs which will enhance workers' abilities to cope with the changes they must make in their lives. Essential components of support services to older workers are: (1) counseling issues; (2) accessibility; (3) on-going assessment; (4) training of service providers; (5) training of workers themselves; and (6) community involvement. Both business and government must begin to develop policies that will break down existing barriers and recognize that older workers continue to be important to the economy. (RB)

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Older Workers in Transition: ERIC Digest

by Lisa Avedon

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Older Workers In Transition

Lisa Avedon

Overview

Many older workers today are perplexed and dismayed by the swift and dramatic changes occurring in the work place. For most of their adult lives, they have functioned successfully in stable work environments where they anticipated holding their jobs until retirement. These older workers are discovering that they may not achieve their dreams of spending the last years of their work lives productively and they may not achieve financially independent retirement. They are also unsure of their ability to cope with the ensuing difficulties. For counselors, finding ways to help older workers presents a dilemma because older workers have not traditionally been part of their clientele. Counselors quickly become aware both of the obstacles older workers face and the difficulties in finding and accessing services which could result in successful transitions for older workers.

Older workers who are in transition - either within the workplace or being displaced from the workplace - require services which are geared to their unique needs. These include counseling; valid, meaningful, and reliable support services; and learning programs which will enhance workers' abilities to cope with the changes they must make in their lives.

Background

Mature workers have been important partners with Canadian industry. However, in the last 15 years, they have often found themselves outside of the plant gates wondering what happened, or still inside, but anticipating dramatic workplace changes that threaten their job security. Plant closures, downsizings, restructuring, new technologies, international trade agreements, ecological concerns, changing demographics, have affected the Canadian workforce. Workers in their 40's and older are particularly affected. While some older workers may be able to leave the workforce voluntarily by taking advantage of early retirement, most do not have the financial resources to do so, nor can the economy afford for them to retire early. By the year 2000, 35% of the workforce will be 45 years of age or older (CLFDB, 1993), making the future issues of the older worker more pronounced.

Older workers were encouraged a generation ago to enter the workforce by leaving school at 16 or by immigrating to Canada. Now they find themselves competing for jobs in work environments that are often dramatically different from those they have experienced. The characteristics that employers sought so eagerly in the past — stability, working independently, and the willingness and ability to follow instructions precisely - have been replaced by different priorities: coping with constant change, teamwork, continuous learning, and technological skills which were unknown a generation ago. The requirements of changing technology and economy are obstacles to the employment of older workers because they lack the formal educational requirements (Ontario Ministry of Labour, 1993) and employers lack the willingness to train them (David, 1993).

At the same time, we have recognized the inadequacy of programs for older workers. Few employers provide career counseling for employees. If help is provided to workers who are being displaced, it is usually confined to job-search workshops. The Canadian Labour Market Productivity Centre (1989) emphasized the importance of providing accessible, timely, and appropriate counseling for older workers, and of ensuring that they are well integrated with other services and then evaluated according to outcomes. Of 13 recommendations to the federal government, three addressed counseling, and five mentioned support services. A follow-up report, in reviewing the federal government's responses to the recommendations, noted that while a few improvements had been made, much more could and should be done (Canadian Labour Force Development Board, 1993).

A Possible Solution

The Adjustment Advisory Program of the Ontario Training and Adjustment Board (OTAB), working with other levels of government, employers, and community organizations, has provided assistance to workers in plant closures, downsizings, and other job threats. Since a large proportion of older workers have been affected, their needs are emphasized in the counseling and support services which are provided, resulting in a placement rate which is dramatically higher than usually experienced by older workers. The following are the essential components of these services:

Counseling issues—"Stable" workers have had virtually no contact with the helping professions, are not experienced in reflecting on their job skills, are likely to re-

sist change, and may feel traumatized by what is happening around them (Avedon, 1991). They may be enduring what Schlossberg and Robinson (1993) call "non-events"— expectations that should come to pass but do not. In this case, they expect to be continuing the same work they have been doing for years and retiring from what they consider to be "their jobs." Counseling is provided individually and in groups. Group counseling is important for emotional support and for learning from one another's experiences.

Accessibility—"Action centers" are established within plants, in trailers or other buildings on the grounds, in union halls, or in store fronts. The action centers are the focal points of all services and their schedules correspond to those of the workers'. Centers offer "one-stop" information, counseling and, where feasible, training. Staff usually include peer "helpers," (identified by fellow workers) counselors, ESL, English or French literacy instructors, placement personnel, and skill-training instructors. Services are provided in a worker's first language when possible.

On-going assessment — In addition to the usual assessment procedures, workers are continuously assessed on an informal basis since their needs change throughout the transition process. Initially, program staff provide informal assessments by walking around the plant and chatting with workers in the cafeteria. These are invaluable in developing understanding of the work environment, workers' duties and relationships, and the corporate culture, all of which influence the transition process.

Training of service providers — All those involved in the process are considered links in it and become involved in learning about the various parts of the services as issues arise. This includes company personnel, committees, and action center staff, including peer helpers and clerical staff.

Training —Older workers learn best when training approaches are consistent with workers' learning styles (Rosen & Jerdee, 1989). Step-by-step approaches, which result in positive learning experiences, encourage older workers to believe in their ability to continue learning (Avedon, 1991). In plant closures and downsizings, initializing training during the notice period enables older workers to make transitions into learning situations while they are still employed. If their learning experiences are positive they are more likely to continue training after termination.

Community involvement — Community partners are also critical to the process since a strong network will add to the services provided by the action center. These services include: training information, job opportunities, family counseling and longer-term assistance. Linkages to community services are important since older workers move through the transition process at their own pace and in their own way.

Conclusion

It is possible to help older workers make effective transitions. This requires providing appropriate counseling and support services in an accessible and timely manner, with an awareness of all of the necessary linkages. Both business and government must begin to develop policies that will break down existing barriers and recognize that older workers continue to be important to the economy. We need to do this before the retention and retraining of older workers becomes an even greater issue (Lefkowich, 1992).

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Lisa Avedon, is Senior Manager of the Adjustment Advisory Program, Ontario Training and Adjustment Board, currently on a secondment to a special project on counseling in conjunction with the Premier's Council. She is an adult educator and counselor who has worked on many issues involving work transitions.

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